

# WHAT THE FROGS SAY

Legends and Folk-lore of the Swamps in the Sunny South

By MARTHA YOUNG

THIS is the time of the frogs. In all swamp and marshes they are talking—strange talk and not understandable to you unless some old negro story-teller has translated their language to you. Many legends, too, will they tell you, these old ties between Mother Nature and her stepchildren, for that is just what these old tale-tellers are—own children to Nature, and they know how to tell us stepchildren the secrets of the mother.

When you go out at afternoon over the Southern fields you will see among the grasses everywhere the blooming toad-flax. It is a spear of pale-blue flowers on a straight stem, for all the world like a wisp of blue thread wound about the weaver's loom.

"What is that, mammy?"

"Toad-flax, chile."

"Oh, it is beautiful!"

"Yes, honey. Miss Toad-frog left it dar. Hit's des de tangle ob her spinnin' never got done. She had a stint to spin and weave. Ef she had a-done it she'd a-been wearin' blue silk now. But she heerd de slidin' ob de water, and she smelt de slime er de swamp, and she seen de shine er de moon on de pond, and she drapped her stint er spinnin', and she got off her white-satin stool and she went down to low groun'."

"And she was spinning herself a blue-silk gown?"

"Yes, chile, but when she take her foot from de treadle and her hand from de wheel, all de thread and de skein got twist up in little blue snarls, like dis—dis is dat toad-flax. Nobody can't git dese tangles out for weavin'. She stop de stint half done. She never have no silk gown. She wear rusty clo'es de rest ob her days. She vit got flighty ways. Hit's easy to git to low groun', but hit hard to leave dem low ways."

"She can't live in the fields any more?"

"No, honey. Heah sits her white-satin stool fer her. Fresh frog-stools pops out de groun' eb'ry night, but she can't set on 'em no mo'. She do hop up to de fields in moonlight and look, but she pottor go back to de swamp and cook."

"Cook? Do frogs cook? What do they cook?"

"Yes, dey cook. What dey cook? Listen. Dey're tellin' you now: 'Fried bacon! Fried bacon! Fried bacon!'"

Sure enough, you will hear the little frogs from all the swamps and marshes singing in concert: "Fried bacon! Fried bacon! Fried bacon!"

"Mammy, what will they do with so much fried bacon?"

"Dey 'spectin' comp'ny."

"Who, mammy?"

"Listen. Dat ole bullfrog'll tell who he 'spectin'. Listen to him now: 'President! President! President!'"

Sure enough, away down in the swamp the frogs were saying it over and over deep in their throats: "President! President! President!"

"But Mister Frog be lucky ef he git to eat dat fried bacon his lady frog tellin' 'bout, and not get eat hissef—eat all up."

"Why, mammy, who will eat him all up?"

"Snake will, honey. Mister Snake sho will eat Mister Frog ef he git a chance! One night, moon-light night like dis, Mister Snake meet up wid Mister Frog on de high groun'. Mister Snake he right den ax his good frien', Mis' Owl, for ter eat supper wid him. But take keer, he ain't yit grease his skillit! But snake been po' man all his life, gwine be po' all his days; he des done got some dollars in his pocket."

"Ah!"

"Hit spring er de year, you know, chilleen, and Mister Snake done des shed his ole suit er clo'es and get on his new. Old suit lym' by. You done yo'se'f foun' shed snake skins side de path in de fiel'?"

"Yes, mammy."

"Well, like a po' man Mister Snake befo' dis—and sence also—done des t'row away what he ain't right den got on his back. But dis time soon as he make de change Mister Lizard come long. Mister Lizard he got mo' clo'es den any man in de country."



But dem what has much is al'a's bargainin' fer mo'. So he slide up to Mister Snake and offer him seben and a half dollars fer dat old suit. Mister Snake make some talk 'bout de clo'es bein' wort' mo', but Mister Lizard stick to his price. Mister Snake take what he can git. Den Snake neber is had and neber mo' is to hab so much money, study like a po' man how to spend it. So fust t'ing he ax Mis' Owl to tea-supper."

"She said she'd come?"

"Dat she did. Den Mister Snake study 'bout he'll hab fried frog-legs fer de fust dish. Den he meet Mister Frog on de high groun' and he start after him. Den Mister Frog make fer de low groun'. He hop and he hop. Mister Snake he slide and he glide. Mis' Owl she flop and she flop in de trees long de path watchin' dem two. She know her supper 'pend on who beat dat race. Mister Snake he gain on Mister Frog. Dat Mister Frog little mo'n skeered to death. He 'gin to holler like he do holler when he skeered: 'Quit! Quit! Quit! Quit!' But Mister Snake he don't quit. Dey two done nigh 'bout retch de swamp. Mister Frog hear de good water dar and he know ef he retch dat he safe. He hear his little brudder frogs

hollerin' fer to cheer him: 'Wade in! Wade in!' He hear his big brudder frogs hollerin' fer to cheer him: 'Tain't but knee-deep! Knee-deep! Knee-deep!'"

"Mis' Owl in de tree-top wink and blink and hop and flop, and den she know she los' her supper, fer into de creek jump Mister Frog. Ker-splash! Ker-splash! Dar!"

"Yes, honey, he got save dat time."

"And what did Mister Snake do?"

"He sit down on de bank fer to count his money ober fer to see what he better buy fer tea-supper sence he can't git fried frog legs. He set and he count and he hiss: 'Seben-seben-seben-seben an' some mo'."

"Bullfrog on de log in de middle de creek he say deep: 'Ten! Ten! Ten! Ten!'"

"Snake t'ink he arguin' wid him 'bout his own money what he tryin' to count, and he hiss back. 'Bullfrog croak ag'in way down in his t'roat: 'Ten! Ten! Ten! Ten!'"

"Snake he git rale mad den and he des up and ting all dat pile er money in de

creek. He say: 'Tain't ten! Hit seben an' some mo'. Count hit yo'se'f and see ef you don't b'leeb me!' Der snake done los' all his money. He po' man yit."

"Well, he ought to stop eating up his neighbors."

"He ain't gwine do dat, chile. Special ef his neighbors littler and poorer dan him. He went after Mister Frog 'nother time."

"When, mammy?"

"Well, de nex' time he wa'n't so bol'. He put on his 'ceivin' way, he did. He go down in de low groun' sayin' as he go: 'O-a! O! I ain't gwine eat nairy 'nother frog—he slippin' and slidin' on a slimy log—'O-a! O! I ain't gwine eat nairy 'nother frog.'"

"Soon as de little lady frogs hear him dey all set up sech a gay singin' twist deyse'ves: 'Glad er dat! Glad er dat! Glad er dat!'"

Sure enough, from down in the swamp the singing came to us, and they seemed saying just that: "Glad er dat! Glad er dat! Glad er dat!"

"Whilst de lady frogs all hollerin' 'bout dey glad er dat," mammy resumed, "Mister Snake he make a spring at de fatter frog in de bunch! But—splish—splash! All de frogs jump into de creek, ever one, and Mister Bullfrog he holler deep in his t'roat: 'You didn't do it! You

didn't do it! You didn't do it!' And all de little lady frogs answer to him: 'Glad er dat! Glad er dat! Glad er dat!'"

The queer antiphony was going on right then. Mammy had many other stories of the frogs which she told us as she carried us to walk, or as she rocked us to sleep, or as we sat watching her eternal work of making patch-quilts. All held such exact imitations of the notes of the frogs that they delighted us who heard them.

One was the story of the First Rogue. He was an old black man brought from Africa. His name was Johnny Mingo. He liked the good things his master gave him to eat and to drink and to chew and to smoke (for he liked tobacco better than all else); but he always wanted more, more, more. So, one night as he went from work to his cabin his road lay by his master's tobacco-field. Nobody was near except old Johnny Mingo. The temptation was too great to be resisted, so he slipped into the field and picked a load of the rich leaves.

Then with his booty he was slipping to his cabin when as soon as his foot touched the foot-log across the brook he heard: "You stole! You stole! You stole!" It was Mister Bullfrog.

Johnny Mingo knew the voice, so he stopped short and put on as bold a face as he could, and asked his accuser: "If I steal, what I stole?"

The little lady frogs took up the story and made answer: "To-bac-co! To-bac-co! To-bac-co!"

Then Johnny Mingo dropped his booty into the brook and fled to his cabin, for his sin had found him out.

Many of mammy's songs and stories were about the frogs. I recall one that always delighted an audience of small children:

Mister Bullfrog put on de  
soldier-clo'es,  
And he went to de well to  
shoot some crows.

De powder flash—de crows flew away—  
Mister Frog halter to hunt some yother day.

Cap'n Spooner git de word from Mister Jay,  
Come plow his fiel' fer not much pay.  
Cap'n Spooner say his leg's so thin and long  
Dey'd break ef go to work for a song.

Mister Snail he drawed on de fo'-mile shoes,  
He 'low to tell de buzzard de latest news.  
Buzzard pass de snail t'ree times on de road—  
And neber knowed whicher way de big boots good.

O, de chicken-snake got out his cowhide trim,  
He 'low to knock de blackbird off er de limb  
He des ketch sight er de wing er de bird—  
De nex' time he comin' he better send word.

Another one to which mammy taught us some queer dance-steps was this:

De redbird died ob de whoopin'-cough;  
Butcher-bird died ob a colic.  
I met Mister Frog, his fiddle on's back  
Inquirin' de way to de frolic.

O, de owl's laid up wid bad sore eyes;  
De rain-crow's down wid de fever;  
Mistis Frog's trig out in her bes' wash-clo'es  
Mister Frog's got on his beaver.

De kill-dee' died ob a shakin' chill;  
De robin died ob de gout, oh!  
I met Mister Frog des lost in de marsh  
Inquirin' de dryes' route, oh!

The frogs also played their part in plantation games. The boys played leap-frog. One boy put hands on knees, with bent back, and another boy took a running start and leaped over the first boy. Just a short space beyond the first boy he took the same position as the first had. The third boy repeated what the second had done. I tell you it was an active fellow who came last if he did his part in the play: he had the whole row of stooping boys to leap over. A good feat that! And then the game began over with the first for last this time. Still another game, and in this we little girls joined, was "Frog in the Middle." All in the game, except us, took hands in a ring and shut eyes and went around and around singing:

Frog in de middle and he can't get out!  
Take a little stick and punch him out!  
One was in the middle of the ring with open

